

Using bracteates as evidence for long-distance contacts

Article

Published Version

Behr, C. (2006) Using bracteates as evidence for long-distance contacts. Reading Medieval Studies, XXXII. pp. 15-25. ISSN 0950-3129 (ISBN 9781407300788) Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84536/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: University of Reading

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Using bracteates as evidence for long-distance contacts

Charlotte Behr

Roehampton University

Introduction

The study of golden pendants, so-called bracteates, can contribute to the understanding of long-distance contacts in northern, western and central Europe in the 5th and 6th centuries. It is well known from the extensive archaeological record that the countries north and east of the Roman Empire were far from being isolated from the networks of trade and exchange in the Roman Empire and beyond, links that often survived the end of the western Roman Empire in the 5th century. Among the numerous finds made in northern and central Europe that belonged predominantly to a sphere of wealth and luxury were Roman coins, glass vessels, bronze pots, precious and semi-precious stones, even a Buddha statue was found on the island of Helgö in the Mälaren area.¹ Bracteates allow the reconstruction of a different type of long-distance network because they were not objects of trade and commerce but belonged to a sphere of gift exchange and diplomatic contacts.² The distribution pattern of these precious objects that were characterised by their intricate and sophisticated iconography leads to the recognition of contacts over long distances crossing political and ethnic boundaries. The study of the meaning and function of the bracteates that were worn as amulets showing images of Germanic gods and myths can also contribute to the discussion of the nature of distant contacts and of the people who were responsible for establishing and maintaining them in the late and post-Roman periods.

Bracteates are round pendants made of gold foil that were stamped on one side with a die showing a figurative image.³ They were worn on necklaces, either singly or

together with other bracteates, other pendants or beads.⁴ With more than 900 finds they form one of the largest find groups in migration-period northern European archaeology. Currently about 620 different die images are known mostly from one bracteate but also from series with up to 14 die-identical bracteates.⁵ The central images of the pendants have always a diameter of between 2 and 2.5 cm. Some were stamped on a larger disk and the central image was surrounded by one or more concentric rings that were decorated with individual stamps usually with geometric designs and sometimes small images of animals or anthropomorphic heads. In some instances it is possible to show that the same stamp was used in the border zone on two different bracteates.⁶ The edge of the disk was surrounded with gold wire and a loop was attached. On some bracteates the loop attachment is strengthened with a triangular sheet of gold that is decorated with filigree and occasionally with some human masks.

To identify long-distance contacts between the people who owed or at least who deposited bracteates different aspects of the distribution pattern of bracteate finds are significant. There are bracteates that were connected because they were made with the same tools, be they the same dies with which the central image was punched or the same stamps used to decorate the concentric border zones around the central image. Then there are clusters of bracteates that are related because of the stylistic similarities in the central image and in other decorative features that are so close that the craftsmen involved must have seen other examples of the same cluster and copied them. Finally, the high level of standardisation in bracteate iconography suggests that the images represented stories and ideas that were shared by people living over a wide area in northern and central Europe.

¹ E. Bakka, 'Scandinavian Trade Relations with the Continent and the British Isles in Pre-Viking Times' in *Antikvariskt arkiv* 40 / *Early Medieval Studies* 3 (1971): 37-51 (39); U. Lund Hansen, *Römischer Import im Norden: Warenaustausch zwischen dem Römischen Reich und dem freien Germanien während der Kaiserzeit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Nordeuropas*, Nordiske Fortidsminder Serie B: 10 (København, 1987); B. Gyllensvärd, 'The Buddha found at Helgö' in *Excavations at Helgö XVI: Exotic and Sacral Finds from Helgö*, B. Gyllensvärd et al. (Stockholm, 2004).

² A. Andrén, 'Guld och makt – en tolkning av de skandinaviska guldbrakteaternas funktion' in *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation. Norden i romersk jernalder og folkevandringstid*, eds. C. Fabeck and J. Ringtved, Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter XXVII (Århus, 1991) 245-256; M. Gaimster, 'Scandinavian Gold Bracteates in Britain. Money and Media in the Dark Ages', *Medieval Archaeology* 36 (1992): 1-28 (21f.).

³ All bracteate finds before 1989 are published with photos, drawings and descriptions in the iconographical catalogue *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit*, ed. K. Hauck, et al., 1-3, Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften 24, 1 - 3 (München, 1985-1989) [IK].

⁴ N. L. Wicker, 'Display of Scandinavian Migration Period Bracteates and Other Pendant Jewelry as a Reflection of Prestige and Identity' in *De Re Metallica. The Uses of Metal in the Middle Ages*, eds. R. Bork, et al., AVISTA Studies in the History of Medieval Technology, Science, and Art 4 (Aldershot, 2005) 49-61 (54f.).

⁵ Fourteen die-identical bracteates have been found in a hoard in Øvre Tøyen, Akershus, Norway (IK 479). They have been made with the same central die but the border zones were decorated differently.

⁶ M. Axboe, 'The Scandinavian Gold Bracteates: Studies on their Manufacture and Regional Variations', *Acta Archaeologica* 52 (1981): 1-100 (52-55).

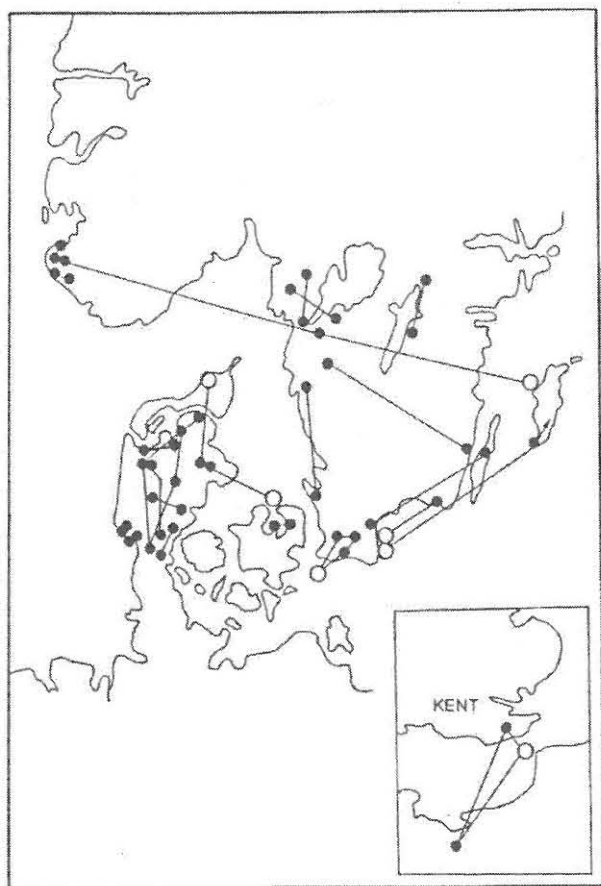


Fig. 1. Distribution map of die- and stamp-linked bracteates (without links within Gotland and Funen). Uncertain findplaces are marked with an open symbol (Axboe, 'Guld og guder', 197).

It has long been recognised that the inspiration for the bracteate images came from the image of the Roman emperor on Roman medallions and coins of the Constantinian period.⁷ Soon the northern bracteate designers developed their own iconographic concepts to express their ideas. The interpretation of the images is controversial but there can be no doubt that the exceptional level of uniformity in the iconography was used to represent the same god and the same stories relating to this god.

Bracteates were made for a relatively short period between the mid 5th and the mid 6th century.⁸ The largest concentrations of bracteate finds are in southern Scandinavia, especially on the Danish islands, Seeland

⁷ Christian Jürgensen Thomsen who published the first academic study about gold bracteates in 1855 made this observation, C. J. Thomsen, 'Om Guldbrakteaterne og Brakteaternes tidligste Brug som Mynt', *Annaler for Nordisk Oldkyndighed* (1855): 265-347 (270).

⁸ M. Axboe, 'The chronology of the Scandinavian gold bracteates', in *The pace of change: studies in early medieval chronology*, eds. J. Hines, K. Højlund Nielsen, F. Siegmund (Oxford, 1999), pp. 126-147; M. Axboe, *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit – Herstellungsprobleme und Chronologie*, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 38, (Berlin, 2004), pp. 203ff.

and Funen, in Jutland and in south-western Sweden, on the Baltic islands, Gotland, Öland and Bornholm, and in south-western Norway. On the periphery of these areas bracteates have also been found in eastern Sweden, central Norway, eastern Britain, and along the North Sea coast in northern France, Frisia and Germany. There are also some finds further south and east in Germany, Poland, Austria and even Hungary. Whereas bracteates were deposited in southern Scandinavia always in hoards, they were also put into graves in the other areas of distribution. Hoards could consist of a single bracteate or of several bracteates or of bracteates together with other precious metal objects. Many were found in close proximity to or even in settlements.⁹ Graves with bracteates belonged mostly to women.¹⁰



Fig. 2. C-bracteate from Hult, Dalsland, the example with the broadest rim (IK 283, 1)

⁹ H. Geisslinger, *Horte als Geschichtsquelle dargestellt an den völkerwanderungs- und merowingerzeitlichen Funden des südwestlichen Ostseeraumes*, Offa-Bücher 19 (Neumünster, 1967), pp. 50ff.; J. Hines, 'Ritual Hoarding in Migration-Period Scandinavia: A Review of Recent Interpretations', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 55 (1989): 193-205 (198); C. Fabeck, 'Samfundsorganisation, religiøse ceremonier og regional variation', *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation. Norden i romersk jernalder og folkevandringstid*, eds. C. Fabeck and J. Ringtved, Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter XXVII (Aarhus, 1991), pp. 283-303, 292ff.; L. Hedeager, 'Sacred Topography. Depositions of wealth in the cultural landscape', in *Glyfer och arkeologiska rum – en vänbok till Jarl Nordbladh*, eds. A. Gustafsson, H. Karlsson (Göteborg, 1999), pp. 229-252 (234ff.).

¹⁰ C. Behr, 'The origins of kingship in early medieval Kent', *Early Medieval Europe* 9,1 (2000): 25-52 (35, 47ff.); M. Gaimster, 'Gold Bracteates and Necklaces. Political ideals in the sixth century', in *Roman Gold and the Development of the Early Germanic Kingdoms. Aspects of technical, socio-political, socio-economic, artistic and intellectual development, A.D. 1-550. – Symposium in Stockholm 14-16 November 1997*, ed. B. Magnus, Konferenser 51 (Stockholm, 2001), pp. 143-155 (143ff.).

Little is known about the manufacture of bracteates.¹¹ No workshop that can be clearly linked to the production of bracteates has ever been identified. Only two bracteate dies have been found so far, in 1990 in Postgården in northern Jutland and in 2005 in Essex, but there are no bracteates known that were made with these dies.¹² That is why any conclusions about their manufacture have to be drawn from the objects themselves.¹³ Some bracteates were linked by the use of the same tool, either a die or a stamp. They are offering the possibility to recognise more or less distant contacts even if it remains debatable how they ended up in their different locations (Fig. 1).¹⁴ The longest distance between die-linked bracteates has been observed in a group of four bracteates showing an anthropomorphic head following the model of the imperial head on Roman medallions placed over a quadruped, probably a horse. One of them was found in a large hoard containing 15 bracteates and several other gold objects in Madla in Rogaland in south-west Norway, one in an unknown findspot on the Baltic island of Gotland and two in a small hoard in Hult in Dalsland in western Sweden, more or less halfway between the two other finds. (Fig. 2)¹⁵ The central images are identical but there are some variations between them in the border decoration and the loops. The three find spots were located in three different political entities that had social and economic links as an analysis of their archaeological record from the migration period demonstrated.¹⁶

Another group of die-linked bracteates from fairly distant sites included two finds from Kent, grave 90 in the cemetery of Sarre and an unknown find location, and one cross-Channel find from Normandy, grave 39 in the cemetery of Hérouvillette (Fig. 3).¹⁷ They show an interlaced quadruped animal in profile with its head turned backwards and a snake-like S-shaped body. Here too the border decorations and the shape of the loops vary. The bracteate from Hérouvillette belonged to a number of metal finds from graves in northern France that are described as Anglo-Saxon and which suggest cross-Channel Anglo-Saxon colonies from settlers that may have come either directly from northern Germany or from Britain.¹⁸

How did tool-linked bracteates arrive at their distant places of deposition? There are various models to explain this observation. Die- or stamp-linked bracteates may have been made in one workshop and then given to various people who lived in distant locations but were connected by a common donor, be it a relation or a lord who used these objects as gifts to express relationships, possibly forms of dependency with the recipients.¹⁹ Or, the people who transported the pendants afar may have travelled to the place where the bracteates had been made to visit or to attend a special occasion and were given here the pendants.²⁰ Alternatively, the people who received the bracteates may have lived originally in close proximity to where they had been made but some then moved further away taking their jewellery with them. One obvious possibility was exogamy.²¹ In this model women were establishing or reinforcing through marriage links between families and distant communities and can be traced through the jewellery with which they were buried or that they deposited in a hoard. Even assuming that die-linked bracteates were made in one location it

¹¹ The most recent summary of the state of research Axbøe, *Goldbrakteaten*, 1-30; see also M. Axbøe, 'Probleme der Brakteatenherstellung. Eine Übersicht über die Forschung', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 22 (1988): 158-169.

¹² M. Axbøe, 'A Die for a Gold Bracteate' in *Sources and Resources. Studies in honour of Birgit Arrhenius*, eds. G. Arwidsson, et al., Pact 38 (Strasbourg, 1993); Axbøe, *Goldbrakteaten*, 3; C. McDonald, 'Essex/Hertfordshire', *Medieval Archaeology* 50 (2006): 281f.; M. Axbøe, *Brakteatstudier*, Nordiske Fortidsminder, Serie B: 25 (København, 2007), p. 14f.

¹³ N. L. Wicker, 'On the Trail of the Elusive Goldsmith: Tracing Individual Style and Workshop Characteristics in Migration Period Metalwork', *Gesta* 33, 1 (1994): 65-70; N. L. Wicker, 'Production Areas and Workshops for the Manufacture of Bracteates' in *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung. Abhandlungen des Vierten Internationalen Symposiums über Runen und Runeninschriften in Göttingen vom 4. - 9. August 1995*, eds. K. Düwel and S. Nowak, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 15 (Berlin - New York, 1998), pp. 253-267; M. Axbøe, 'Probleme', 158-169.

¹⁴ K. Hauck, 'Gudme in der Sicht der Brakteaten-Forschung (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten, XXXVI)' in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 21 (1987): 147-181 (166ff.); M. Axbøe, 'Guld og guder i folkevandringstiden. Brakteaterne som kilde til politisk/religiøs forhold' in *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation. Norden i romersk jernalder og folkevandringstid*, eds. C. Fabech and J. Ringtved, *Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter XXVII*, (Aarhus, 1991) pp. 187-202 (196ff.).

¹⁵ IK 283, 1-3 with further literature.

¹⁶ B. Myhre, 'Chieftains' graves and chieftain territories in South Norway in the Migration Period', *Studien zur Sachsenforschung*, 6 (1987): 169-187; P. H. Ramqvist, 'Über ökonomische und sozio-politische Beziehungen der Gesellschaften der nordischen Völkerwanderungszeit', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 25 (1991): 45-72 (46ff.) described these entities as 'petty kingdoms'.

¹⁷ IK 492, 1-3. J. Decaëns, 'Un nouveau cimetière du Haute Moyen Age en Normandie. Hérouvillette (Calvados)', *Archéologie Médiévale*, 1 (1971): 1-125 (39ff., 74ff.); E. Bakka, 'Scandinavian-type gold bracteates in Kentish and continental grave finds' in *Angles, Saxons and Jutes. Essays presented to J. N. L. Myres*, ed. V. Evison (Oxford, 1981), pp. 11-35 (14, 18, 23f.); S. Chadwick Hawkes, M. Pollard, 'The gold Bracteates from sixth-century Anglo-Saxon Graves in Kent, in the Light of a new Find from Finglesham', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 15 (1981): 316-370 (328, 340, 343); Behr, 'The origins', 49.

¹⁸ E. James, *The Franks* (Oxford, 1988), p. 103.

¹⁹ A. Y. Gurevich, 'Wealth and Gift-Bestowal among the Ancient Scandinavians', *Scandinavica* 7,2 (1968): 126-138 (134ff.); Andrén, 'Guld og makt', 252ff.; Gaimster 'Scandinavian Gold Bracteates', 17.

²⁰ K. Hauck, 'Gudme als Kultort und seine Rolle beim Austausch von Bildformularen der Goldbrakteaten (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten, L)' in *The Archaeology of Gudme and Lundeborg*, eds. P. O. Nielsen, K. Randsborg and H. Thrane, *Arkæologiske Studier* 10 (Kopenhagen, 1994), pp. 78-88 (83).

²¹ B. Arrhenius, 'Smycken som diplomati' in *Föremål som vittnesbörd. En festskrift till Gertrud Grenander Nyberg på 80-årsdagen den 26 juli 1992*, ed. K. Ägren, (Stockholm, 1992), pp. 18-25 (22ff.); but see also B. Magnus, 'Brooches on the move in Migration Period Europe', *Formvännan*, 99 (2004): 273-283 (280f.) discussing the difficulties in identifying exogamy through female grave goods.

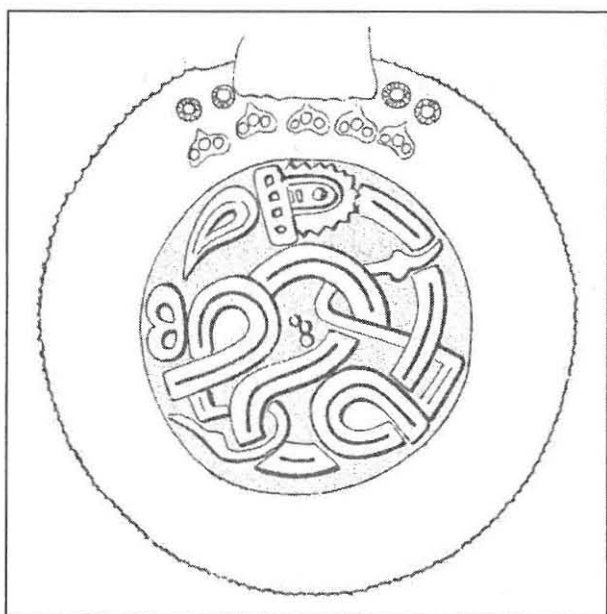


Fig. 3. D-bracteate from Hérouvillette, Normandy (IK 492, 2).

is not obvious where this workshop was located. The common archaeological practice to use comparisons of style or technique to identify regional or local relationships between objects and thus locate the origin of objects is particularly difficult when discussing these golden pendants. Bracteates were quite unique objects and the iconography of the central image and the stamp decoration of the border zones had no apparent parallels on other contemporary objects that would allow an unambiguous regional or local attribution. It is only on the basis of a comparison with stylistically closely related bracteates and their predominant area of distribution that it is probable to assume that the first example of bracteates with the head over the quadruped originated from south-west Norway and the second example of bracteates with the animal from Kent.²²

Not only the circumstances under which bracteates were manufactured are little known also the role or status of the craftsmen who were involved in designing and making bracteates cannot be assessed with certainty.²³ Most probably migration period goldsmiths were working for a lord who had access to raw materials and provided them with the gold. They may have worked either permanently or temporarily close to the seat of those who commissioned the bracteates. Archaeological evidence about early medieval metal-working craftsmen suggests that they were at least intermittently itinerant workers.²⁴

That means that tool-linked bracteates were not necessarily made in the same location but could have been manufactured in different locations because the craftsman or, another possibility, the tool had travelled.²⁵ Whatever the scenario tool-linked bracteates indicate some forms of contact over long distances. Other groups of tool-linked bracteates have been found in more or less distant locations. No obvious patterns in terms of distance, direction or density are evident but links appear to connect all Scandinavian regions that had any bracteate finds at all. This dense network suggests at the very least intense exchange of objects and ideas. Whereas no tool-linked bracteates connected Scandinavia with the more peripheral distribution areas, bracteate finds in Britain, Frisia, Germany or Pannonia were stylistically closely related to Scandinavian finds.²⁶

Since the 19th century bracteates have been divided into four different categories according to the image in the centre.²⁷ Almost all bracteates that have ever been found belong to one of these categories. Within these groups, as has long been observed, are clusters of bracteates that are stylistically particularly closely related.²⁸ Pesch has recently defined these clusters as 'Formularfamilien'.²⁹ Bracteates belonging to a cluster were characterised by such close correspondences of iconographic details that it

pp. 40ff.; K. Leahy, *Anglo-Saxon Crafts* (Stroud, 2003), pp. 167ff. Archaeological evidence for goldsmiths and their work in the migration period include the study of objects, tools, models, casting moulds and also smith graves like the one that was found next to the bracteate grave in Hérouvillette (grave 10) see Decaëns, 'Un nouveau cimetière', 12ff.

²⁵ Wicker, 'On the Trail', 69.

²⁶ Axboe, 'Guld og guder', 196ff.

²⁷ O. Montelius, *Från järnåldern* (Stockholm, 1869). According to him A-bracteates are those that show an anthropomorphic head in profile, B-bracteates show one or more complete anthropomorphic figures and C-bracteates have an anthropomorphic head in profile over a quadruped. They all can be accompanied by additional animals, most commonly birds, graphic symbols and/or inscriptions, often in runes. D-bracteates are defined as only showing one or more animals, usually interlaced, but no anthropomorphic features. C- and D-bracteates form by far the largest groups among the bracteates.

²⁸ Already B. Salin, 'De nordiska guldbrakteaterna', *Antikvarisk Tidskrift för Sverige*, 14,2 (1895): 1-111 (24ff., 99ff.) grouped the bracteates in clusters of stylistically related pendants and named the clusters according to their predominant areas of distribution. His work was continued, among others, by M. Mackeprang, *De nordiske Guldbrakteater*. Jysk arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter 2, (Århus, 1952). However the allocations of bracteates to clusters was often based on rather impressionistic ideas. For a critique and discussion of the methodological implications of forming clusters see M. P. Malmer, *Metodproblem inom Järnålderns Konsthistoria* (Bonn - Lund, 1963), pp. 76ff. and E. Bakka, 'Methodological Problems in the Study of Gold Bracteates' in *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 1 (1968): 5-35, 45-56.

²⁹ A. Pesch, 'Uppåkra im Licht der Formular-Familien der völkerwanderungszeitlichen Goldbrakteaten' in *Central Places in the Migration and the Merovingian Periods*, eds. B. Hårdh and L. Larsson (Stockholm, 2002), pp. 55-78 (56ff.) where she developed a conceptual framework for describing 'Formularfamilien'; a comprehensive study of the whole bracteate corpus is forthcoming, A. Pesch, *Die völkerwanderungszeitlichen Goldbrakteaten - Formularfamilien der Bildarstellungen. Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit* 4,3: Auswertung, eds. K. Hauck, K. Düwel and W. Heizmann, *Ergänzungsbande zum RGA* 38,3, (Berlin - New York, in press). (I am grateful to Alexandra Pesch for her permission to include some of her unpublished distribution maps in this article.)

²² C. Behr, *Die Beizeichen auf den völkerwanderungszeitlichen Goldbrakteaten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), pp. 186f.; Behr, 'The origins', 48ff.

²³ Wicker 'On the Trail'.

²⁴ J. Werner, 'Zur Verbreitung frühgeschichtlicher Metallarbeiten (Werkstatt - Wanderhandwerk - Handel - Familienverbindung)', *Antikvarisk Arkiv* 38 / *Early Medieval Studies* 1 (1970): 65-81; H. Roth, *Kunst und Handwerk im frühen Mittelalter. Archäologische Zeugnisse von Childerich I. bis zu Karl dem Großen* (Stuttgart, 1986),

is inconceivable that they were designed independently but instead must belong to one workshop-context.³⁰ The craftsman, or –men, who designed them must have known the other images of bracteates belonging to the same cluster. Clusters that are defined as ‘Formularfamilien’ can be mapped. The emerging patterns differ significantly as the following examples illustrate.

The first example comprises a cluster of 34 C-bracteates from sixteen different dies (Fig. 4 a-d).³¹ The designs of the central images show close stylistic similarities in the shape of the anthropomorphic head, its particular hairstyle ending in a knot and being framed with a dotted band, the oval shape of its eye and the attachment of mouth and nose to the neck of the quadruped. The animals too have many stylistic details that are closely comparable, including the shape of the body, the position and shape of the legs, the beard, the horns, the eye and the mouth. Seven images show only the head and the animal whereas on eight images they are accompanied either by a bird or a cross, a swastika, a rosette or three dots forming a triangle.³² Most find spots of bracteates from this cluster were in Scania in southern Sweden usually containing one bracteate only;³³ others came from the Danish islands of Funen,³⁴ Zealand³⁵ and Bornholm³⁶, an unknown find spot in Schleswig-Holstein,³⁷ from Pomerania in Poland³⁸, the island of Gotland³⁹ and Västergötland⁴⁰ in Sweden and one find is unprovenanced.⁴¹ They included series of six or seven die-identical bracteates. Despite all the congruencies between the different versions of this cluster there appear to be some regional variation.⁴² Only on finds from Scania and Bornholm the additional symbols of a cross, a swastika or a circle were inserted,⁴³ whereas the bracteates outside Scania had mostly no additional symbols, except for the one from Zealand with three dots forming a triangle.⁴⁴ This cluster was concentrated around the Oresund. The distribution of the find spots points towards the importance of sea travel to link these

places in Scania, the Danish islands and across the Baltic Sea on its southern coast.⁴⁵

Again it is not obvious where the bracteates forming this particular cluster were first designed or made. As the largest number of different dies has been found in Scania, it is most probable that this cluster was originally linked to one workshop in Scania. A likely candidate is Uppåkra in south-west Scania where the most detailed version of this cluster has been found.⁴⁶

The site of Uppåkra has been researched intensively since 1996 first through systematic field-walking with metal-detectors and later through excavations.⁴⁷ A wealth of material finds dating from the early Roman imperial period to the 10th century has been found.⁴⁸ Throughout this period Uppåkra stood out in comparison with other sites in Scania because the settlement was larger and the finds richer than anywhere else.⁴⁹ The outstandingly rich metal finds and unusual house structures were signs of a so-called central place. The concept of ‘central places’ has been adopted in Scandinavian archaeology in the 1980s to explain sites in which the exceptional archaeological record suggests that they held some form of economic, political, religious and social pre-eminence on a local or regional level.⁵⁰ Among many different crafts, evidence for metal-working has been found in Uppåkra, if not specifically bracteate manufacture.⁵¹ Uppåkra can be compared with a number of other ‘central places’ in migration-period southern Scandinavia.⁵² Particularly well explored is Gudme close to the south-east coast of the island of Funen with its adjacent harbour

³⁰ Pesch, ‘Uppåkra’, 59.

³¹ C. Behr, ‘Beizeichen auf formularverwandten Goldbrakteaten, exemplarisch erörtert’ in *Der historische Horizont der Götterbild-Amulette aus der Übergangsepoche von der Spätantike zum Frühmittelalter*, ed. K. Hauck, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Phil.-hist. Kl. Dritte Folge Nr. 200 (Göttingen, 1992), pp. 111-142 (119ff.); Pesch, ‘Uppåkra’, 66ff.

³² Only a fragment of IK 606 from Smøregård, Bornholm has been found, too small to be certain about accompanying animals or signs.

³³ IK 4 Åkarp, 272 Hermanstorp, 587 Uppåkra, 235 Dybäck, 379 Ven, 53 Fjårestad (with two die-identical bracteates).

³⁴ IK 30 Bolbro (with seven die-identical bracteates).

³⁵ IK 179 Stenholts Vang (with seven die-identical bracteates).

³⁶ IK 592 Sorte Muld and 606 Smøregård.

³⁷ IK 325 Schleswig (uncertain).

³⁸ IK 100 Körlin (with six die-identical bracteates).

³⁹ IK 321 Near Roma.

⁴⁰ IK 138 Olovstorp.

⁴¹ IK 366 unknown provenance.

⁴² Behr, ‘Beizeichen’, 119ff.; Pesch, Uppåkra, 71.

⁴³ IK 53 (swastika and circle), 235 (cross and circle), 379 (swastika and circle), 587 (four circles), 592 (three crosses).

⁴⁴ IK 179 Stenholts Vang.

⁴⁵ Pesch, ‘Uppåkra’, 70f.

⁴⁶ M. Axboe, ‘En C-brakteat fra Uppåkra’ in *Uppåkra. Centrum och Sammanhang*, ed. B. Hårdh, Uppåkrastudier 3 (Stockholm, 2001), pp. 169-174; Pesch, ‘Uppåkra’, 69.

⁴⁷ L. Larsson, ‘The Uppåkra Project. Preconditions, Performance and Prospects’ in *Centrality – Regionality. The Social Structure of Southern Sweden during the Iron Age*, eds. L. Larsson and B. Hårdh, Uppåkrastudier 7 (Stockholm, 2003), pp. 3-26 (9ff.).

⁴⁸ Summarised in B. Hårdh, ‘The Contacts of the Central Place’ in *Centrality*, eds. Larsson and Hårdh, pp. 27-66.

⁴⁹ Hårdh, ‘The Contacts’, 61.

⁵⁰ H. Steuer, ‘Reichtumszentrum’, *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 24 (Berlin, 2003): 343-348; H. Thrane, ‘Das Reichtumszentrum Gudme in der Völkerwanderungszeit Fünens’ in *Der historische Horizont der Götterbild-Amulette aus der Übergangsepoche von der Spätantike zum Frühmittelalter*, ed. K. Hauck, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Phil.-hist. Kl. Dritte Folge Nr. 200 (Göttingen, 1992), pp. 299-380; C. Fabeck, ‘Organising the Landscape: a matter of production, power and religion’ in *The Making of Kingdoms*, eds. T. Dickinson and D. Griffiths, Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 10 (Oxford, 1999): 37-47; see also contributions in B. Hårdh, L. Larsson (eds.), *Central places in the migration and Merovingian periods: papers from the 52nd Sachsensymposium*, Lund, August 2001. Uppåkrastudier 6 (Stockholm, 2002).

⁵¹ B. Hårdh, ‘Uppåkra i folkvandringstiden’ in *Fler fynd i centrum. Materialstudier i och kring Uppåkra*, ed. B. Hårdh, Uppåkrastudier 9 (Stockholm, 2003) 41-80 (64ff.).

⁵² J. Ringtved, ‘The geography of power: South Scandinavia before the Danish kingdom’ in *The Making of Kingdoms*, eds. Dickinson and Griffiths, pp. 49-63.



Fig. 4a-c. Three examples of workshop-related C-bracteates: 4a from Dybäck, Scania (IK 235); 4b from Fjärestad, Scania (IK 53); 4c from Bolbro, Funen (IK 30)

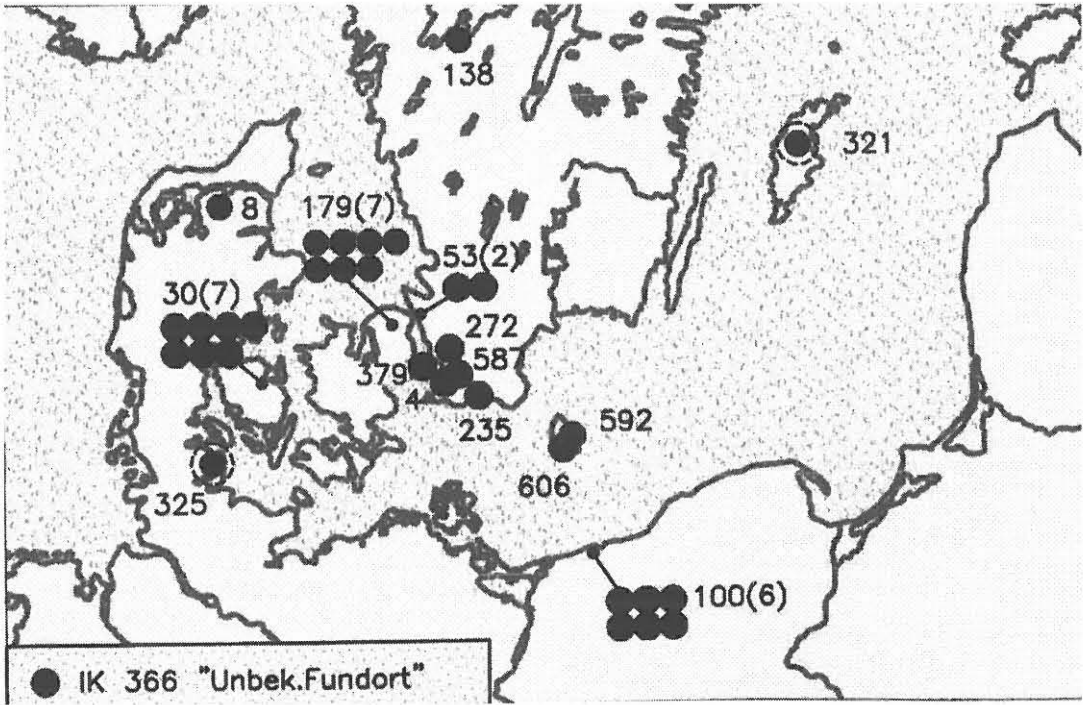


Fig. 4d. Distribution map of stylistically related bracteates (A. Pesch, *Formularfamilien*, in press)

site at Lundeberg.⁵³ In Gudme itself a bracteate hoard containing ten pendants has been found in a posthole of a small house and several additional bracteate finds came from the vicinity of Gudme.⁵⁴ Not only the pattern of frequent bracteate finds in or close to a central place is repeated in numerous sites but also the observation that some bracteates belonging to a cluster of stylistically related bracteates were found in and close to these places whereas others of the same cluster were found in more or less distant locations.⁵⁵ These observations suggest that bracteate production was concentrated in a few workshops in central places that were exchanging and copying iconographic formulas. A limited number of bracteate workshops – however we have to imagine that they operated in reality – would also explain more easily how it was possible to retain such a high level of standardisation of the bracteate iconography than a larger number of workshops which would have led probably to greater diversity.⁵⁶

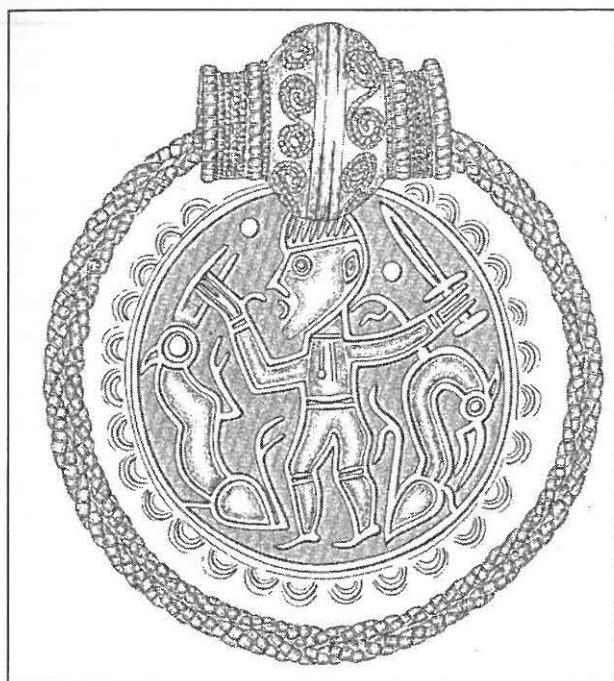


Fig. 5a. B-bracteate of unknown provenance in Schleswig-Holstein, known as 'Hamburg' (IK 71)

No focal point of distribution is apparent in the cluster of nine B-bracteates showing a male figure armed with a sword fighting two quadruped animals with impressive jaws (Fig. 5 a, b). An unambiguous interpretation of the scene is now difficult. Most probably some mythical battle between a god and hostile monsters was pictured that contemporary viewers could identify. Seven bracteates from the same die are known from an unknown find spot in Schleswig-Holstein since the 19th century.⁵⁷ In 2004 a near identical but mirror-image bracteate was discovered as a metal-detector find Near Holt in Norfolk, East Anglia and in 1999 a very similar if less artful bracteate was found in a female grave in Derenburg, in the district of Wernigerode north-east of the Harz mountains, a place that belonged to the Thuringian kingdom.⁵⁸ People wearing these pendants in East Anglia, northern Germany, then belonging to the Saxon settlement area, and Thuringia were linked in some way by these objects with their close stylistic congruencies.⁵⁹ They also shared the knowledge of the mythical story that was told in these images.

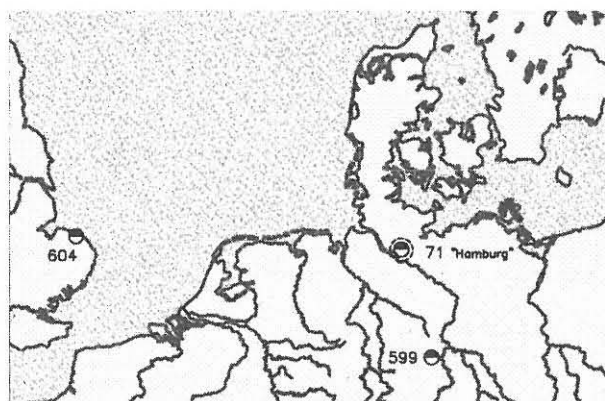


Fig. 5b. Distribution map of stylistically related bracteates (A. Pesch, *Formularfamilien*, in press)

No focal point of distribution is apparent in the cluster of nine B-bracteates showing a male figure armed with a sword fighting two quadruped animals with impressive jaws (Fig. 5 a, b). An unambiguous interpretation of the scene is now difficult. Most probably some mythical battle between a god and hostile monsters was pictured

⁵³ K. Randsborg, 'Beyond the Roman Empire: Archaeological Discoveries in Gudme on Funen, Denmark', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 9 (1990): 355-366; Thrane, 'Das Reichtumszentrum'; P. O. Thomsen, et al., *Lundeberg – en handelsplads fra jernalderen*. Skrifter fra Svendborg & Omegns Museum 32 (1993), pp. 68ff.

⁵⁴ P. V. Petersen, 'Excavations at Sites of Treasure Trove Finds at Gudme' in *The Archaeology*, eds. Nielsen, Randsborg, Thrane, pp. 30-40 (34f.); M. Axboe, 'Gudme and the Gold Bracteates', in *The Archaeology*, eds. Nielsen, Randsborg, Thrane, pp. 68-77.

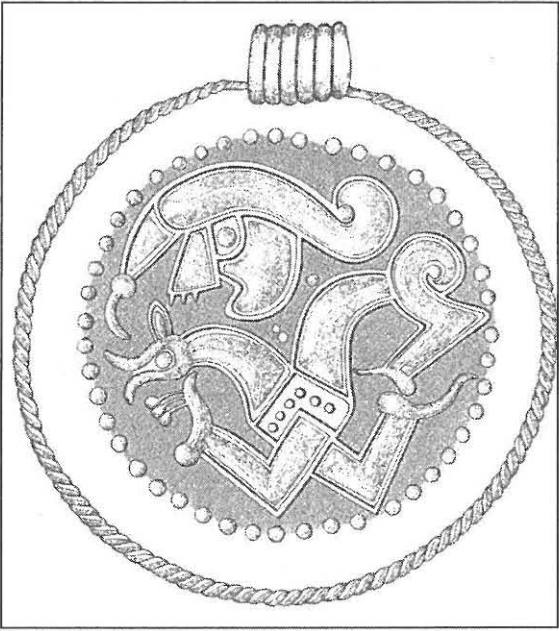
⁵⁵ See clusters in Behr, *Die Beizeichen*, 176ff. and 'Beizeichen', 119ff. (with maps); Pesch, 'Uppåkra', 60ff.

⁵⁶ D. A. Hinton, 'Anglo-Saxon Smiths and Myths', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 80, 1 (1998): 6.

⁵⁷ IK 71 'Hamburg' with literature.

⁵⁸ A. Pesch, 'Und die Götter sind überall', *Archäologie in Deutschland*, 4 (2005): 6-9.

⁵⁹ These bracteates may not be the only bracteate links between Thuringia and East Anglia as H. Vierck, 'Der C-Brakteat von Longbridge in der ostenglischen Gruppe (Anhang VIII)' in *Goldbrakteaten aus Sievern*, ed. K. Hauck, Münstersche Mittelalterschriften 1 (München, 1970): 331-339 (337) pointed out when he suggested that the D-bracteate from grave 15 in the cemetery of Schönebeck, Sachsen-Anhalt, may have been an East Anglian import because of its rough manufacture, lacking a rim and the crudely attached loop. It was made out of silver. Only in eastern Britain bracteates made out of silver without rims and very simple loops have been found.



that contemporary viewers could identify. Seven bracteates from the same die are known from an unknown find spot in Schleswig-Holstein since the 19th century.⁶⁰ In 2004 a near identical but mirror-image bracteate was discovered as a metal-detector find Near Holt in Norfolk, East Anglia and in 1999 a very similar if less artful bracteate was found in a female grave in Derenburg, in the district of Wernigerode north-east of the Harz mountains, a place that belonged to the Thuringian kingdom.⁶¹ People wearing these pendants in East Anglia, northern Germany, then belonging to the Saxon settlement area, and Thuringia were linked in some way by these objects with their close stylistic congruencies. They also shared the knowledge of the mythical story that was told in these images.

A different pattern of distribution can be recognised in a cluster of 32 C-bracteates from eighteen stylistically related dies (Fig. 6 a, b). The common design of an anthropomorphic head over a stylised quadruped was characterised by high relief. The head was bearded and

Fig. 6a. C-bracteate from Sievern, Lower Saxony (IK 157)



Fig. 6b. Distribution map of stylistically related bracteates (A. Pesch, *Formularfamilien*, in press)

⁶⁰ IK 71 'Hamburg' with literature.
⁶¹ A. Pesch, 'Und die Götter sind überall', *Archäologie in Deutschland*, 4 (2005): 6-9.

the nose was square. The hair-style ended in a knot and a bird's head was placed above the forehead. The animal was designed with a bell-shaped head with an open mouth, a round eye and frequently a pair of horns, and a right-angled body decorated with a triangular body strap. There were never any additional animals or inscriptions on bracteates of this cluster, only occasionally some individual dots.⁶² They have been found in hoards and in graves in locations spreading between south-west Norway, western Sweden, Jutland, northern Germany, Frisia and eastern Britain.⁶³ There is no obvious concentration of finds around a central place but the distribution pattern along the North Sea coast can be correlated with coastal travel routes along the North Sea coastline as they are known from near-contemporary written sources.⁶⁴

Not only these two clusters of B- and C-bracteates indicated close stylistic links between Scandinavia, northern Germany and eastern Britain but also two clusters of D-bracteates that have been found in hoards in Jutland, northern Germany and Frisia, in several rich female graves in eastern Kent and in a grave and as a single find in East Anglia.⁶⁵ The nature of these contacts has been debated. The Kentish bracteate finds may express continued links with the Scandinavian and continental homelands through gift exchanges or marriages some generations after the Jutish invasion of Kent that Bede described in the 8th century.⁶⁶ Alternatively, bracteates following closely Scandinavian models may have been made locally in Kent in a particular political situation in the later 5th and earlier 6th centuries when it was important for ideological reasons to state links with Scandinavia.⁶⁷

⁶² Behr, *Die Beizeichen*, 185f.

⁶³ IK 317 Rømul, Sortrøndelag, 275 Høyvik, Sogn og Fjordane, 109 Lille Skjør and 169 Sletner, Østfold, 137 Øvre Tøyen, Akershus, 38 Dalen, Dalsland, 363,2 Lilla Jored, Bohuslän, 64 Grumpan, Västergötland, 327 Scania (?), 274 Højbjerg, Jutland, 103 Landegge and 157, 1 and 2 Sievern, Niedersachsen, 46 Dokkum and 598 De Valom, Frisia. The British finds were from 306 Morning Thorpe, Norfolk, 602 East Leake, Nottinghamshire, 288 Kirmington, Lincolnshire and 607 Near Bridlington, East Riding. For an iconological analysis of this cluster see K. Hauck, *Goldbrakteaten aus Sievern*, Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften 1 (München, 1970), pp. 136ff; for a typological analysis see S. Nancke-Krogh, 'De gyldne "ryttre". En analyse og vurdering af en gruppe C-brakteater', *Hikuin*, 10 (1984): 235-246.

⁶⁴ K. Hauck, 'Völkerwanderungszeitlicher Seeverkehr, erhellt mit Schiffsresten und Fundorten von Goldbrakteaten (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten XXXIX)' in *Trade and Exchange in Prehistory. Studies in Honour of Berta Stjernquist*, eds. B. Hårdh et al. (Stockholm, 1988), pp. 197-211 (203). Hauck illustrated sea travel in the migration period with bracteate finds in conjunction with evidence for harbours and landing points.

⁶⁵ In IK vol. 3, Text, 42ff. they are listed as Grundmuster 1, Varianten 1a and 1c. The tool-linked bracteates from Kent and Normandy, IK 492, 1-3, mentioned above, belong to Variante 1a. See map in E. Bakka, 'Scandinavian-type gold bracteates in Kentish and continental grave finds' in *Angles, Saxons and Jutes*, ed. V. Evison (Oxford, 1981), pp. 11-35 (Fig. 1).

⁶⁶ Bakka, 'Scandinavian-type', 12; Chadwick Hawkes, Pollard, 'The gold Bracteates', 325f.

⁶⁷ Andrén, 'Guld og makt', 254; L. Hedeager, 'Migration Period Europe: the Formation of a Political Mentality' in *Rituals of Power from*

Apart from clusters of bracteates that were based on stylistic congruencies of the central image, other features of bracteate designs point to workshop connections. Seven bracteates from eastern Sweden and Poland were linked through a rare detail. In the triangle that was attached underneath the loop re-enforcing it were one, three, six or ten human masks in relief applied,⁶⁸ several of them framed in gold wire and associated with filigree volutes and spirals. Similar masks are known from a medallion of the Roman emperor Gratian that was mounted sometime in the 5th century as a pendant in an elaborate frame decorated with fifteen human masks. The pendant was found in a hoard at Szilágysomlyó (now Simleu Silvaniei) in Transsylvania.⁶⁹ The masks were put in oval frames of gold wire and separated by filigree double volutes. Technically and stylistically they were closely related to the masks on the bracteates.⁷⁰ Relationships between eastern Scandinavia and the lower Danube region during the later Roman and migration periods have long been observed in the material culture.⁷¹ South-eastern European objects reached Scandinavia through trade links, tribute and loot brought back by returning Heruli and payments to northern recruits in the Roman army.⁷² Several bracteate finds from graves and hoards in the lower Danube area too indicate links with southern Scandinavia.⁷³ Among the eleven bracteates from six different dies was one C-bracteate from an unknown find spot in Hungary⁷⁴ that belongs to a cluster of bracteates predominantly found on the Baltic islands of Gotland, Öland and Bornholm, in Scania and on the Danish island of Lolland-Falster (Fig. 7 a, b).⁷⁵ Whilst the

Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, eds. F. Theuvs and J. Nelson (Leiden, 2000) 15-57 (42f.); Behr, 'The origins', 50f.

⁶⁸ One mask: IK 11 Åsum, Scania, 57,1 Frilde, Gotland, 211 Wapno, Poznań, Poland, 221 Bostorp, Öland; three masks: IK 45 Dödevi, Öland; six masks: IK 62,1 Gerete, Gotland; ten masks: IK 144,1 Ravlunda, Scania (one is now missing).

⁶⁹ W. Seipel (ed.), *Barbarenschmuck und Römergold. Der Schatz von Szilágysomlyó*, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Wien, 1999), p. 186, cat. no 14.

⁷⁰ S. Lindqvist, *Vendelkulturens Ålder och Ursprung*. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiciens Handlingar 36.1 (Stockholm, 1926), pp. 19ff; A. Bursche, 'Die Rolle römischer Goldmedaillone in der Spätantike', in *Barbarenschmuck*, ed. Seipel, pp. 39-53 (42) considered the possibility of itinerant goldsmiths to explain the numerous parallels with finds in the Germanic areas.

⁷¹ B. Arrhenius, 'Skandinavien und Osteuropa in der Völkerwanderungszeit' in *Germanen, Hunnen und Awaren. Schätze der Völkerwanderungszeit*, exhibition catalogue ed. W. Menghin, T. Springer and E. Wamers (Nürnberg, 1988), pp. 441-456; B. Arrhenius, 'Connections between Scandinavia and the East Roman Empire in the Migration period' in *From the Baltic to the Black Sea. Studies in medieval archaeology*, eds. D. Austin and L. Alcock (London, 1990), pp. 118-137.

⁷² Arrhenius, 'Skandinavien', 442ff.

⁷³ Andrén, 'Guld og makt', 254 emphasised the ideological rôle of bracteates in Pannonia and alluded to the Scandinavian origin myth of the Langobards in Pannonia, a parallel with the Jutish origin myth in Kent.

⁷⁴ IK 375 Ungarn.

⁷⁵ IK 62,1 Gerete, Gotland; 45 Dödevi, 115 Lundebý, 106 Lilla Istad, 186 Tjusby, 221 and 223 Bostorp, Öland; 324 Sandegård and Rønne (two fragments from the same bracteate) Bornholm, 202 and 203 Vå, 11 Åsum, Scania; 340 Sønderby, Lolland-Falster. IK 367 is from an unknown find location. Behr, *Die Beizeichen*, 181ff.

other bracteate finds from the lower Danube region were related to Scandinavian bracteates four of the dies were showing rather unorthodox images that were unique among bracteate iconography.⁷⁶

So far groups and clusters of bracteates have been discussed that were linked through a common tool or through stylistic congruencies. However, even those bracteates that were not directly connected were all derived from a common idea. The observation that very few predominant iconographic patterns characterised these pendants makes it very unlikely that bracteates were 'invented' in more than one place. It is more probable that they were conceptualised and designed in one place from where the idea and the designs spread. The central place of Gudme has been suggested as a possible place from where bracteate iconography originated and some influence over the iconographic concepts continued to be exerted.⁷⁷ The ensuing success of the pendants with their sophisticated iconography being repeated quite unchanged for a hundred years or so, suggests that the images were telling meaningful stories that mattered to their owners.

Germanic society in the migration period has often been described as small and diverse political, military and ethnic groupings. Germanic religion too tends to be perceived as being characterised by local and regional variation.⁷⁸ Bracteates, however, are an example demonstrating that the veneration of the one god that was represented on the pendants, the knowledge of mythical stories related to him and their pictorial representations were shared widely in northern, western and central Europe during the late Roman and migration periods crossing boundaries between different groups.⁷⁹ It is generally accepted that people in the late Roman and early medieval periods were highly mobile and that distant contacts existed throughout Europe including

Scandinavia and beyond. What can the study of bracteates add to this picture?



Fig. 7a. C-bracteate of unknown provenance in Hungary, known as 'Ungarn' (IK 375).

The distribution of this exceptionally large and homogeneous group of objects that were linked through common tools, styles and iconography shows a particularly dense network of contacts and exchanges throughout northern Europe including links with Frisia, eastern Britain, Poland, southern Germany and the lower Danube area. The distribution patterns demonstrate the special importance of coastal routes between western Scandinavia, Frisia and eastern Britain and land routes between eastern Sweden and south-eastern Europe. Concentrations of tool-linked and stylistically connected pendants around central places in southern Scandinavia emphasised the role of these newly emerging political and economic centres as places where bracteates were presumably designed, made and distributed. The religious character of these pendants highlights the role of central places for religious rituals. Bracteates were not the only objects but significant examples to demonstrate links and exchanges between central places. The analysis of stylistically linked bracteates shows that not only the objects themselves but also iconographic patterns were exchanged and copied.

⁷⁶ IK 491 Šaratic-D, Moravia, 484 Poysdorf-D, Lower Austria, 559 Várpalota-D, Hungary, 206 Várpalota-B.

⁷⁷ K. Hauck, 'Füncns besonderer Anteil an den Bildinhalten der völkerwanderungszeitlichen Brakteaten (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten, XLIX)', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 26 (1992): 106-148 (108); K. Hauck, 'Gudme als Kultort', 84f.

⁷⁸ A. Hultgård, 'Religion', *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 24 (Berlin, 2003), pp. 429-457 (432f.).

⁷⁹ A comparable example for the knowledge, exchange and appreciation of religious images among the social elites over a wide geographical area in northern, western and central Europe can be found in the first half of the seventh century, some two to three generations after the bracteate period. The scene of a horseman throwing a spear and being aided by a small divine figure whilst his horse was fatally attacked by an enemy who was already lying on the ground was represented on four helmets and on one disk brooch. One helmet was found in mound one in the cemetery at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia, and the other helmets in graves 7 and 8 in Valsgarde and in grave 1 in Vendel, two cemeteries in Uppland in eastern Sweden. The brooch was discovered in a female grave in Pliezhausen in south-west Germany, the settlement area of the Alamans, where this part of a horse harness was used in secondary function. H. Steuer, 'Krieger und Bauern – Bauernkrieger. Die gesellschaftliche Ordnung der Alamannen' in *Die Alamannen* ed. Archäologisches Landesmuseum Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart, 1997), pp. 275-287 (282f.).

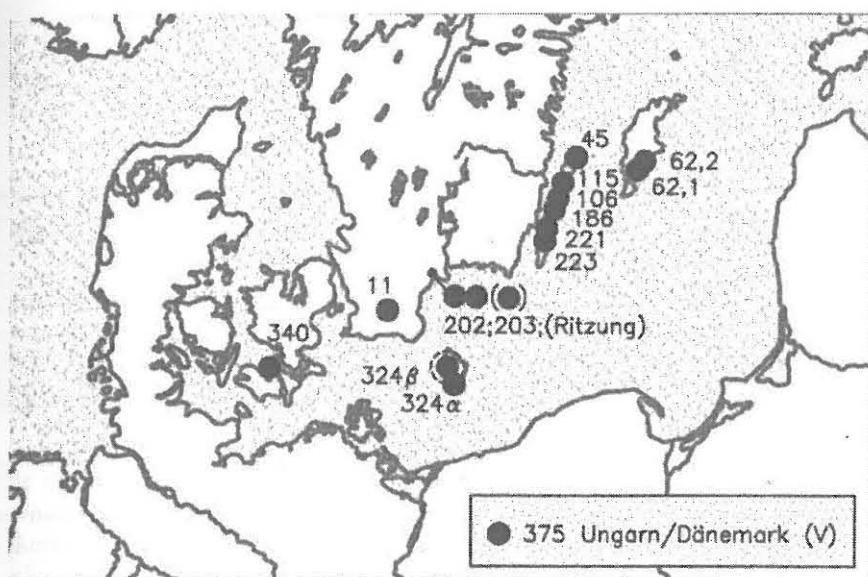


Fig. 7b. Distribution map of workshop-related bracteates (A. Pesch, *Formularfamilien*, in press)

But what does the study of connections between these pendants tell us about connections between the people who designed, made, wore or deposited them? The ways in which relationships were established and upheld cannot be identified unambiguously by using archaeological objects. Links that are apparent through the objects may have been direct or only through intermediaries. Bracteates may have been sent as diplomatic gifts through envoys. Itinerant craftsmen may have been responsible for the spread of tool- or stylistically linked clusters of bracteates. Alternatively, the owners may have travelled for various reasons taking their jewellery with them, be it to migrate to a new homeland, be it to marry outside their immediate area, and then deposited or were buried with their pendants that now appear in the archaeological record as linked. Bracteates may have been donated at the occasion of special religious festivals or political gatherings to which people travelled more or less long distances and then returned with their new pendants. We also need to take into account that only the places where bracteates were deposited are known but the owners may not even have

lived close to the place where the objects have been found but went to a chosen location to offer the bracteates as a sacrifice to the gods.⁸⁰

Still, it is possible to characterise the people who owned, wore and deposited bracteates as belonging to the elites in their societies. They had access to precious metal and objects of exquisite artistic qualities. The people who designed and made bracteates were highly educated, possibly initiated to specialised religious knowledge which enabled them to devise sophisticated pictorial narratives.⁸¹ They were also exceptionally skilled to craft the pendants. They too may have belonged to the social elites. People linked through bracteates lived in many different political and ethnic communities but shared common knowledge and appreciation of a god and his deeds that were represented on the pendants. Contacts and exchange among them were not sporadic, isolated events but happened frequently, intensively and in many directions, whatever the precise nature of individual contacts was.

⁸⁰ Hoards with bracteates were most probably sacrificial depositions and not treasure hoards, see L. Hedeager, *Iron-Age Societies. From Tribe to State in Northern Europe, 500 BC to AD 700*, (Oxford, 1992), pp. 56ff.

⁸¹ K. Hauck, 'Methodenfragen der Brakteatendeutung. Erprobung eines Interpretationsmodells für die Bildzeugnisse aus einer oralen Kultur (Zur Ikonologie der Goldbrakteaten, XXVI)' in *Zum Problem der Deutung frühmittelalterlicher Bildinhalte*, ed. H. Roth (Sigmaringen, 1986), pp. 273-296 (280).